

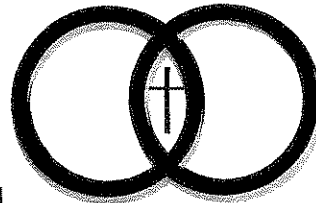
Roots of Strife

*Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all
sins.*

Proverbs 10:12

Introduction

Couples often enter a marriage with a “happy-ever-after” glow. There is nothing wrong with that as long as they temper the illusion with realism. Married people, who are deeply in love and greatly respect each other, still have disagreements.



There are problems with relatives and friends. Couples undergo stress from illness or death. Careers change and jobs may be lost. Hectic schedules may separate spouses more than is good for the marriage. Priorities may change for one spouse and not for the other. One of the spouses may have had a dysfunctional family, which creates negative attitudes and behaviors. Hundreds of

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unexpected events and unanticipated stresses assault couples, daily tearing at the stability of their marriages.

Couples can overcome stress by approaching the problems honestly and without anger. They must follow Jesus' example of love and forgiveness.

Relatives

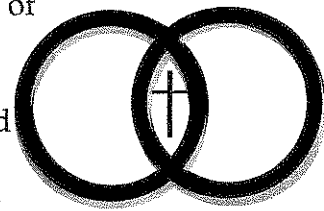
Almost every comedian tells mother-in-law jokes. One study indicated that the husband's mother causes as much trouble for a young couple as all the other in-laws combined. Much of this conflict is between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law and centers on competition for the attention of the son and husband. Most of the remaining conflict is about the proper way to rear children. The mother-in-law frequently questions the mother's child-rearing policies. Often she overindulges the grandchildren with gifts.

This stereotype of the poor relationship between a wife and mother-in-law can reveal some truth about the difficulty in establishing one family separated from two others. How does a newly married couple handle this? Sometimes not well. They must always remember the Biblical instruction, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife" The newly formed family has to make decisions based on what is best for the sanctity of their family.

How much influence should family and friends have on decisions of the couple? This varies with each family. Below are some guidelines and principles which can help.

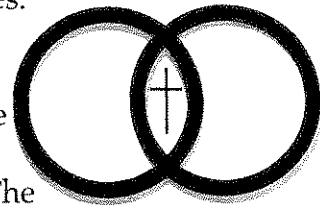
- Final decisions belong to the couple.
- Strive for a policy of harmony between the generations without allowing unwarranted interference in your marriage and family.
- Choose counsel from friends and family who can be objective when the couple needs and seeks advice.
- Seek Christian friends and family members who give advice in a humble spirit.
- Make family decisions based on love.

Serious stress often begins with the marriage plans and ceremony. Family and friends will offer advice from the choice of spouse to the color of the bridesmaids' dresses. The two future mothers-in-law may compete and conflict over decisions. It becomes more complicated when there is an ex-husband, or ex-wife and a new spouse. Who should sit where? Who should be invited? Whose granddaughter is the flower girl? Will it upset your cousin if he is not the best man? Which friends or relatives will be bridesmaids? The bride and groom always have to keep in mind, "Whose wedding it is" while trying to avoid as much conflict as possible.



Society often depicts holidays, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas, as the happiest celebrations of the year. However, for many young families, these two holidays are the most stressful times they face. Each spouse's family competes for time with the couple and grandchildren. They become hurt when they think they have been slighted. Some couples eat four or more meals on Thanksgiving Day just to avoid hurting other people's feelings or breaking a tradition. They eat at her parents' home, at his parents' home, at their own home, and at grandparents' homes. Additional problems arise when there has been a divorce, remarriage, and potential bitterness among various family members. The old lyric, "Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go!" almost needs a new verse stating which grandmother.

Christmas can add stress with relatives. Each household has some tradition or event that everyone must attend. Grandparents, who have opened presents on Christmas Eve for 35 years, expect their children and their mates to continue the tradition with them. The other father and mother-in-law expect their time. The newly-formed family has to do some creative scheduling to satisfy the wants of others and to establish its own traditions.



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Couples must openly discuss how to celebrate holidays, or resentment will build. This can result in an argument or hurt feelings. The best solution is a compromise which respects the rights of the couple and the expectations of the relatives.

Schedules

Most people consider their lives to be "too busy." They do not have enough time for everything they "have to do." When this is true, personal conflicts arise. The people involved find themselves in stressful situations.

Schedule conflicts result from an individual's or family's responsibilities, commitments and interests. Responsibilities are those things which we must do, such as work, attend school, eat meals or sleep. Commitments are those things we choose to do, which obligate us to add them to our schedule, such as teach Sunday school, bake treats for school, coach basketball or sing in the church choir. Interests are those things we want to add to our schedule because they fill a physical, social, intellectual or emotional desire. We may read, watch television, have a party or go bowling. The last category is where most over-scheduling occurs for a family.

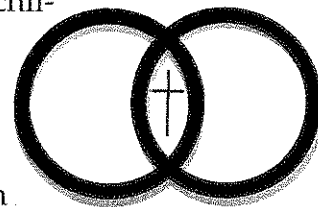
Everyone has the same amount of time each day. However everyone does not have the same number of responsibilities and commitments. Family

members should prepare a schedule built around responsibilities and commitments. They should then identify common family interests.

A family schedule will usually work if members post it in a prominent place, if it is flexible in case of unforeseen events, and if it has weekly and monthly breakdowns. Problems occur when there is an imbalance of time for the three categories, when the family fails to coordinate the individual schedules of family members, and there is an unwillingness to follow the schedule by family members.

Society and Divorce

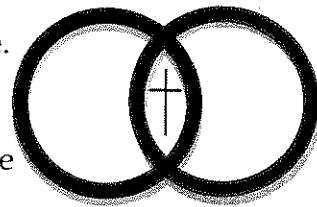
The ultimate stress to a family is the threat or actuality of a divorce. Once rare, there were 1.2 million divorces in the United States in 1994. Divorces have an impact on the couple involved, any children involved, and other relatives and friends. The threat of divorce in itself has become a root of strife in many families. Couples will use the ease of obtaining a divorce as a threat when problems arise or an argument escalates.



American attitudes toward divorce have changed dramatically since the mid-1900's. Secular society seems to celebrate the failure of marriage as a success. Disintegration and disaster has become synonymous with growth and triumph.

In the June 1982 issue of *New Woman*, authors John and Nancy Adam devalue marriage saying, "Yes, your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles. People want to experience new things. Change is part of life. Change and personal growth are traits for you to be proud of, indicative of a vital searching mind. You must accept the reality that in today's multi-faceted world it is especially easy for two persons to grow apart. Letting go of your marriage — if it is no longer good for you — can be the most successful thing you have ever done. Getting a divorce can be a positive, problem-solving, growth-oriented step. It can be a personal triumph."

Christians, especially those experiencing difficult times in their marriages, must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking like the world. Society has made it easy to obtain a divorce. This does not mean that couples should choose divorce instead of solving their problems in marriage. Despite the clear principles set forth in the Bible and the best intentions of the Christian couples who marry each year, the divorce rate of believers continues to increase.



While most Christians recognize limited, justifiable reasons for divorce, the ideal is one man, one woman for one lifetime. They, therefore, resist looking for an answer in divorce. At the same time, they are sympathetic and empathize with those who have experienced divorce, choosing to encourage them

toward growth in the Lord. There are many sociological and psychological reasons for the increase in the divorce rate among Christians. The major reason is the loss of commitment to a Christian understanding of the sanctity and permanence of marriage.

When problems occur in a marriage, Christians have three choices. They can divorce, choosing what appears to be the easiest way to stop problems. They can ignore the problems and continue to be unhappy, while destroying their testimony to friends and families. They can be mature and responsible by admitting the problems and then work to reestablish an intimate and loving marriage.

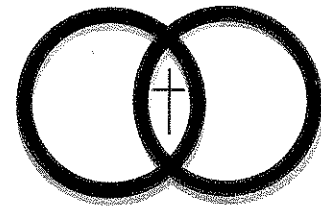
Christians should not focus on whether there are legitimate reasons for divorce. Their focus should be on living in the will of God through a permanent marriage. This will help to ensure personal happiness, strong Christian homes and a stable society.

Dysfunctional Families

Some families have problems that cause them to be dysfunctional. Problems within individual members of a family can create serious strife that can destroy families. Christian family counselors and therapists characterize a dysfunctional family as one that has one or more of the following:

- One or both partners being unbalanced, preoccupied, emotionally restricted, frustrated or unrealistic in their views of the world.

- Partners and/or children who are addicted to alcohol or drugs.
- Partners who are workaholics.
- Partners who are consumed by rage or compulsion concerning things about which healthy people are casual.
- Immature partners who rely excessively on others for nurturing, ego-bolstering, advice and help.
- Partners who divorce, separate, fight viciously and feel bitter toward each other and marriage in general.
- Partners who remain together in a hostile relationship "for the sake of the kids" without trying to correct the relationship itself.
- Partners in an uncomfortable relationship with God. Or they may be intensely religious, believing that God will accept them if they look and think exactly right. They are extremely rigid in theology, thinking that the only correct way in which to relate to God is their way. These people are adamant that their children precisely follow the pattern they have established.



While those living in a dysfunctional family experience physical and emotional pains, the real tragedy is that the problems affect succeeding generations. The type of dysfunction may change from generation to generation. An alcoholic father may have a son who is a workaholic and a daughter who spends

her way to bankruptcy. The alcoholic father has produced children who are dysfunctional in different ways. Like a weak thread in a piece of cloth, the dysfunction syndrome passes from one generation to the next, weaving a pattern of instability and pain.

Dysfunctions pass from one generation to the next for two basic reasons. Our ideal of family and adulthood is shaped by our childhood experience. Unless we make conscious effort to change, we are destined to repeat the family experience. We allow our childhood experience to determine our perceptions and choices. Christians who are members of dysfunctional families should undergo counseling in order to break the cycle.

Summary

Christian marriages can be threatened by a number of assaults including:

- poor communication,
- financial mismanagement,
- relationships with relatives,
- overburdened schedules,
- availability of divorce, and
- dysfunctional partners.

Overcoming these assaults can present huge challenges. Sometimes they seem so enormous that the potential for a successful marriage appears to be out of reach. However, a Christian couple can take

confidence in cooperating with God Who has obligated Himself to accomplish His will in and through them. God provides this confidence in these verses:

- Jeremiah 29:11 — For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.
- Philippians 1:6 — Being confident of this very thing, that He Who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.
- Philippians 2:13 — For it is God Who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.
- Philippians 4:13 — I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me.

